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ABSTRACT

The best way to develop a unique identity for the National Education Debate Association (NEDA) is to debate propositions distinct from National Debate Tournament (NDT) and the Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA). A neglected area of debate includes propositions temporally framed in the past. Yet, the present propositional categories of fact, value, and policy can explicitly incorporate a temporal frame of reference. Specifically, a taxonomy can be created that includes a temporal frame. Thus, there can be propositions of past, present, and future fact, value, and policy. Debating such propositions would entail extensive use of counterfactual knowledge. Murphy (1969) argues that "counterfactuals were an essential method of historians; these were by their nature (are) unverifiable propositions." The fact that they are unverifiable has led to criticism of counter factuals as a form of logic. Thus, standards need to be applied in the assessment of counterfactual scenarios. It should be noted, however, that counterfactuals are a common model of logic in a number of areas, such as legal argumentation and the study of economics. The advantages of an historical approach at the NEDA debate are numerous: (1) the educational focus of competitive debate would be expanded; (2) most students have dead spots in their understanding of American history and such a debate format would offer an opportunity to students to become stronger in these areas; and (3) debating historical perspectives may improve the quality of argumentation. (TB)

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Debating Historical Propositions: Toward a Unique Genre of NEDA Debate

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Abstract

Traditionally, debate propositions have fallen into two major categories: propositions of policy and propositions of value. This essay proposes a new taxonomy that would incorporate a temporal frame of analysis. Specifically, historical propositions are recommended as a means to develop a unique genre of NEDA debate. This conceptualization would be consistent with the philosophical premise of NEDA: maximizing the educational experience of undergraduate students who participate in intercollegiate competitive debate.

Debating Historical Propositions:

Toward a Unique Genre of NEDA Debate

Traditional Parameters of Debate Propositions

Traditionally debate propositions have fallen into three major categories: value, fact, and policy. Propositions of value involve "a judgement about a person, place, thing, or idea" (Rieke and Sillars, 1984, p. 49-50). Propositions of fact deal with issues of "truth" (p. 49). Propositions of policy involve how "someone or some agency to behave" (p. 50). Each type of debate proposition has generated accompanying theory. This body of theoretical work has established normative standards for debaters to follow in the argumentative process. For example, in policy debate debaters are expected to address issues of significance, harms, inherency, topicality, and solvency. In value debate, criteria is considered a prima facie issue (Bartanen & Frank, 1991).

For many years, the only major type of debate propositions were policy. National Debate Tournament (NDT) topics were characterized by policy propositions. Policy propositions were used for the first five years of Cross Examination Debate Association (CEDA). The distinction between NDT and CEDA debate primarily rested on the use of cross-examination periods between constructives (Kelly, 1981).

In 1973, NDT adopted the cross-examination format as well. The late 1970's witnessed a shift by CEDA to debating propositions of value. Many in CEDA viewed the shift to value propositions as a positive step toward creating a separate identity for CEDA debate (Pelham & Watt, 1989). To many, the early to mid-1980's were the glory years of CEDA debate. This time witnessed an explosion of debate theory in an attempt to establish standards for debating propositions of value. From this perspective, CEDA's recent return to debating propositions of policy was a regressive step.

From this experience, it can be argued that the best way to develop a unique identity for the National Educational Debate Association (NEDA) is to debate propositions distinct from NDT and CEDA. However, this poses series of challenges:

1. What kind of propositions would be distinct from fact, value, and policy?
2. What would be the standards for debating non-traditional propositions?
3. Would educational values suffer from shifting propositional parameters?

Historical Propositions for NEDA?

Patterson and Zarefsky (1983), in their discussion of differing argumentative claims, established temporal delineations. It was argued that factual claims "may be offered with respect to the past, present, or future" (p. 17). Traditionally, debate propositions have been limited to claims of the

present or future. For example, policy propositions have uniformly included the word "should," which temporally grounds any affirmative case into claims of future fact. Typically, value propositions that have been selected for CEDA debate include the propositional term "is" or "are," which tend to temporally ground affirmative claims to the present.

It should be noted, one of the five choices for the CEDA Spring 1986 topic: "That Lyndon Johnson's 'War on Poverty' exacerbated the problems of poverty in the United States," focused on an historical question (Brownlee, 1989). However, it was not selected as the resolution.

In terms of establishing a distinct genre of NEDA debate, a neglected area of debate includes propositions temporally framed in the past. Yet, the present propositional categories of fact, value, and policy can explicitly incorporate a temporal frame of reference. Specifically, a taxonomy can be created that includes a temporal frame. Thus, we can have propositions of past, present, and future fact, value, and policy.

Under this rubric; the proposed CEDA Spring 1986 resolution would have been a proposition of past value. In addition to the proposed CEDA Spring 1986 resolution, we can operationalize this taxonomy with the following examples:
Past Policy: the United States should have militarily intervened in Vietnam in the 1960's.
Past Fact: the United States was founded on the basis of capitalism.

Based on the temporal frame of these hypothetical resolutions, affirmative and negatives burdens change. For the Vietnam resolution, the affirmative would be bounded by the historical policies followed by the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. Claims could be empirical or probabilistic. Empirical claims would be verifiable in terms of historical data. Probabilistic claims would be speculative in nature. Negative claims could point to "actual" disadvantages stemming from the affirmative policy. Additional negative claims could speculate on policy alternatives.

For example, the affirmative could argue the "domino theory" that all countries in southeast Asia would have fallen to the communists if not for US intervention. This claim is an example of a counterfactual conditional. This proposition takes the generic form "If it had been the case that C (or not C), it would have been the case that E (or not E)" (Fearon, 1991, p. 169).

Debating historical propositions would entail extensive use of counterfactual logic. Historical analysis inherently involves a level of counterfactual reasoning. Murphy (1969) argues that "counterfactuals were an essential method of historians; these were by their nature (are) unverifiable propositions" (p. 15). The fact that they are unverifiable has led to criticism of counterfactuals as a form of logic. Thus, standards need to be applied in the assessment of counterfactual scenarios.

Standards for Debating Historical Propositions?

It should be noted that counterfactuals are a common model of logic. Their use transcends both specialized and general argumentative fields.

Counterfactuals are commonly used in a variety of scholarly disciplines. Fearon (1991) states that "scholars in comparative politics and international relations routinely evaluate causal hypotheses by discussing or simply referring to counterfactual cases in which a hypothesized causal factor is supposed to have been absent" (p. 169).

Conterfactual reasoning is common in legal argumentation. Counterfactual thinking is related to plaintiff compensation. In this context, "jurors are presented alternative event scenarios by the opposing parties" (p. 705). Research indicates that there was a significant relationship between counterfactual thinking and plaintiff compensation (Miller & McFarland, 1986; Bothwell & Duhon, 1994).

Counterfactuals are common to the study of economics. Murphy (1969) argues:

> that we cannot judge any economic policy without
> counterfactuals, we cannot estimate consumer surplus,
> we cannot calculate the effects of a tax or a subsidy,
> the removal of international trade barriers, indeed we

> cannot judge any recommendation to change the status-quo unless we consider the alternative state of affairs. (p. 18)

Counterfactuals are also common in generalized fields of argumentation. Landman and Manis (1992) found "that personally relevant counterfactual thought is commonly engaged in by people outside the laboratory" (p. 476). Roese (1994) argues that "the ability to imagine alternative, or counterfactual, versions of actual events appears to be a pervasive, perhaps even essential, feature of human consciousness" (p. 805).

Given the widespread use of counterfactuals, evaluation of counterfactuals can be extrapolated from existing standards. Meyer and Conrad (1957) argue that even though "counterfactuals cannot be directly tested, it is possible to consider the statement within a valid deductive system, independently of the acknowledged falsity of the conditional clause" (p. 540). Such a derivation is clearly an intuitive one and is not a matter of formal logic (Murphy, 1969).

This kind of test can be referred to as a "plausibility standard." This stands in contrast to a probability standard where the likelihood of a particular event or condition can be predicted. Rescher's (1977) "plausibility" thesis ties the concept of plausibility by advancing a rule "that presumption favors the most plausible of rival alternatives" (p. 38). Rescher argues that

building plausibility comes from three different sources: (1) source reliability, (2) source evidence, and (3) systematicity (p. 41). The first two standards are promoted in NEDA debate and can be described as "the extent to which an authority can be accepted and the probative value of the evidence are general guides to the determination of how likely the belief in question will 'fit' within our present cognitive frame of beliefs" (McKerrow, 1982, p. 119).

The standard of systematicity is described in heuristic terms as the argument "which scores best in point of simplicitly, in point of regularity, in point of uniformity (with other cases), in point of normalcy, and the like" (Rescher, p. 41).

Consistent with this perspective is Fisher's (1977) description of narrative coherence and narrative fidelity. Narrative coherence calls our attention to patterns we have learned about, how scenarios or "stories hang together." Thus, some argumentative scenarios are dismissed out of hand as being counterintuitive. Narrative fidelity is the idiosyncratic test individuals apply to argumentative claims. These "tests" are formed from our own life experiences combined with vicarious learning. Thus, over time, individuals form a set of criteria by which reality is decided. Thus, counterfactual scenarios rooted in common experience and understanding will have greater probative force.

Another inherent aspect of counterfactual reasoning is inferred causality (Kahneman & Varey, 1990). Counterfactual logic involves arguments about what would have happened. This can potentially lead to several problems. One problem is claims of multiple chains of causality linked to a single historical event. Fearon (1991) describes this problem as the "Cleopatra's nose problem" (p. 190). The scenario posits that if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, Antony might not have been so infatuated, and the course of Western history might have been different. "Does this imply that the gene controlling the length of Cleopatra's nose was a cause of World War I?" (p. 190). Fearon (1991) argues that this problem can be avoided if one assumes a regularity theory of causation (Beauchamp & Rosenberg, 1981). This view holds that a cause is something that produces its net effect. Thus, a series of accidental happenings "are not causes but only conditions" (Fearon, 1991 p. 191).

This point is also explored by Goodman (1947) in his discussion of "cotenability." A level of causality needs to be established that produces the "initial conditions" used to draw the inference. Thus, approximate levels of alternative causality need to be accounted for. Einhorn and Hogarth (1986) argue that the net strength of a causal explanation is equal to the gross strength of the hypothesis, less the strength of alternative explanations. Multiple causal chains over time lead to an increased possibility of alternative

events that would produce or negate the inferred outcome. The relative immediacy of the counterfactual scenario in regards to a hypothesized event would be a key factor in argumentative validity.

Despite these problems, counterfactuals can play a valuable role in competitive debate. Murphy (1969) argues that "if we want to say anything about policy in history, then we shall have to use them" (p. 28). Fearon (1991) points to the validity of this form of logic:

> History often provides evidence that leaders considered several possible choices at certain junctures, and in some instances it may be feasible to imagine a different choice without changing other major influences on the outcome in question. The fewer the changes from the actual world required by a counterfactual proposition, the easier it will be to draw and support causal inferences, and the more defensible they will be. (p. 194)

Toward a Unique NEDA Genre

Moving toward debating propositions of history would hold several advantages. The educational focus of competitive debate would be expanded. Nuestadt and May (1986) point to knowledge gaps about important aspects of

American history. Most student have "dead spots" regarding American history "which usually blanket the half-decade or so just before and after birth" (p. xxi). Ignorance regarding all "human history before one's own are commonplace" (p. xxii). Debating historical propositions could help fill in some of these "dead spots" in American or world history. Given the fact that many debaters go on to leadership positions (Colbert & Hunt, 1989), increased historical knowledge would have utilitarian value. Many decisions in public policy are made on the basis of prior historical events. A better understanding of these events would contribute to the quality of decision-making.

Debating historical propositions may improve the quality of argumentation. Speculative scenarios are not limited to counterfactual logic. Most policy debates include speculative scenarios by both the affirmative and negative teams. Issues such as advantages, disadvantages, and solvency are already judged on a plausibility standard. Typically, most debate scenarios are claims of future fact. Since probability cannot be calculated, these claims rest on plausibility premise. The key difference between a counterfactual scenario, versus a future based scenario, is that a future based scenario is judged absent of any historical context. Whereas a counterfactual claim can be judged according to subsequent historical events. For example, earlier we discussed the "domino theory" as a possible counterfactual scenario. It could be argued

that this scenario is false based on subsequent events after the fall of South Vietnam in 1975. It is not possible to test scenarios of future fact in this way.

Conclusions

Given that we are in the infancy of NEDA debate, now is the time to experiment. Debating historical propositions offers NEDA a chance to establish a unique identity in competitive debate. It allows scholars of debate the opportunity to create a genre of theory akin to the explosion of value theory of the early 1980's. It offers the potential to increase the educational value of debate.

Many historical questions still generate contemporary interest: "Was President Kennedy killed as a result of a conspiracy?" "Should the United States have dropped the atomic bomb on Japan in 1945?" The list could go on and on. Many issues still need to be addressed. However, I would urge my colleagues to give the idea of debating historical propositions serious consideration.

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